

Foreword

Teachers live in a dynamic, fast-changing world. New students arrive every year, and teachers must respond to the young people walking in the door. The most effective teachers are always asking questions about what works, what they can learn from the research in their discipline, and what they can learn from their colleagues.

One may start by identifying the underlying complexities that are in fact the very basic needs that apply to all students. Will they be able to meet the literacy demands—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—expected of them? Will they want to participate fully in learning activities that will enable them to reach their potential? For answers to these questions, teachers must not only turn to their own discipline but must also reach across many fields, including language studies, sociology, and psychology, and try to make a coherent plan for themselves. Those of us in networks, like the National Writing Project, frequently turn to our colleagues to make sense of these contexts, but it is a great deal of work for any one person to do, particularly when each school day demands so much.

For these reasons, it was with great anticipation that I turned to Professor VanDeWeghe's new book *Engaged Learning*. How, I wondered, can VanDeWeghe combine what we know about language learning, the demands of a subject discipline, the demands of learning to read and write about complex material, and the demand to conduct classroom-based research with what we know about a human being's natural inclination to learn, collaborate, and make new knowledge his or her own?

Engaged Learning thoughtfully addresses all of these issues. Throughout the book, VanDeWeghe illustrates his points with narratives and provides classroom examples in a skillful before-and-after format, consistently reinforcing the basic principles of engagement that lead to powerful learning. Using Csikszentmihalyi's theories of flow as a baseline goal, he uses engagement as the engine that drives learning activities. Thus, engaging “brains” and “hearts” to achieve flow becomes the goal, and applying engagement to instruction, assessment, and the curriculum

become the methods. Of course, powerful teaching, engaging curriculum, and effective assessment must by necessity make use of what we know about how people learn, and so *Engaged Learning* circles back to the social nature of learning, the power of collaboration, and the delicate balance of power between teacher and students. VanDeWeghe also delves into the ways that young people develop arguments and the basis for their reasoning. He then describes a path, a personal journey if you will, that he suggests young people need to embark upon in order to break away from reductive, dichotomized thinking.

Although *Engaged Learning* advocates for learners' autonomy and knowledge, VanDeWeghe also acknowledges that the demands made on teachers to create an enabling environment are not small. He calls on teachers to read and understand learning in a way that may be unfamiliar, just as developing metacognitive skills in students will be largely unfamiliar to them.

Engagement is a subject of much discussion among educators everywhere. Often, talk among teachers turns to how teenagers and other young people spend their time outside of school, the level of commitment they bring to those activities, and an often invidious comparison with the level of engagement in their classrooms. Young people are enormously engaged in the day-to-day lives of their peers and their own personal interests outside of school. We have seen a veritable explosion of young people's involvement in computer gaming, the creation of Web content, and various forms of written communication between and among their friends. How then to capture that engagement for the classroom? This book describes processes that help to negotiate these barriers.

Engaged Learning shows the way forward to necessary changes for all students to find powerful learning in their school lives. The literacy practices advocated here, the strategies set out in such detail, will enable teachers of every subject and discipline to redefine their teaching across the entire curriculum. The book plumbs the depths of engagement in every aspect and place in education. No classroom process, whether it is reading out loud or listening and discussing, or re-creating historical events or conducting science experiments, is left unexamined. VanDeWeghe's *Engaged Learning* identifies the principles and practices for the classroom that may well recapture the energy and enthusiasm that young people pour into the activities they love.

The classrooms that may result from a diligent use of this book will look very different from the usual, and in some cases, its use could collide head on with current understandings of what constitutes learning and achievement. But imagine a classroom in which 30 or more students are actively engaged in learning, both with their hearts and minds! Isn't it time that such schools were available to all?

—Richard Sterling